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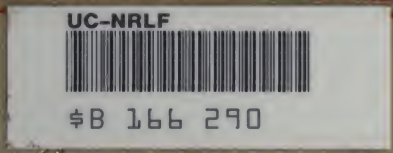

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THE

SERMON IN THE HOSPITAL

FROM 'THE DISCIPLES'

BY

HARRIET ELEANOR HAMILTON KING

LONDON
KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH, TRÜBNER, & CO., LTD.
1891

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Ugo
1891

THE SERMON IN THE HOSPITAL.

Now I heard
Fra Ugo Bassi preach. For though in Rome
He held no public ministry this year,
On Sundays in the hospital he took
His turn in preaching, at the service held
Where five long chambers, lined with suffering folk,
Converged, and in the midst an altar stood,
By which on feast-days stood the priest, and spoke.
And I remember how, one day in March,
When all the air was thrilling with the spring,

And even the sick people in their beds
Felt, though they could not see it, he stood there;
Looking down all the lines of weary life,
Still for a little under the sweet voice,
And spoke this sermon to them, tenderly,
As it was written down by one who heard:

"I am the True Vine," said our Lord, "and Ye,
"My Brethren, are the Branches;" and that Vine,
Then first uplifted in its place, and hung
With its first purple grapes, since then has grown,
Until its green leaves gladden half the world,
And from its countless clusters rivers flow
For healing of the nations, and its boughs
Innumerable stretch through all the earth,
Ever increasing, ever each entwined
With each, all living from the Central Heart.

And you and I, my brethren, live and grow,
Branches of that immortal human Stem.

Let us consider now this life of the Vine,
Whereof we are partakers: we shall see
Its way is not of pleasure nor of ease.
It groweth not like the wild trailing weeds
Whither it willeth, flowering here and there;
Or lifting up proud blossoms to the sun,
Kissed by the butterflies, and glad for life,
And glorious in their beautiful array;
Or running into lovely labyrinths
Of many forms and many fantasies,
Rejoicing in its own luxuriant life.

The Flower of the Vine is but a little thing,
The least part of its life;—you scarce could tell

It ever had a flower; the fruit begins
Almost before the flower has had its day.
And as it grows, it is not free to heaven,
But tied to a stake; and if its arms stretch out,
It is but crosswise, also forced and bound;
And so it draws out of the hard hill-side,
Fixed in its own place, its own food of life;
And quickens with it, breaking forth in bud,
Joyous and green, and exquisite of form,
Wreathed lightly into tendril, leaf, and bloom.
Yea, the grace of the green vine makes all the land
Lovely in spring-time; and it still grows on
Faster, in lavishness of its own life;
Till the fair shoots begin to wind and wave
In the blue air, and feel how sweet it is.
But so they leave it not; the husbandman
Comes early, with the pruning-hooks and shears,

And strips it bare of all its innocent pride,
And wandering garlands, and cuts deep and sure,
Unsparing for its tenderness and joy.
And in its loss and pain it wasteth not;
But yields itself with unabated life,
More perfect under the despoiling hand.
The bleeding limbs are hardened into wood;
The thinned-out bunches ripen into fruit
More full and precious, to the purple prime.

And still, the more it grows, the straitlier bound
Are all its branches; and as rounds the fruit,
And the heart's crimson comes to show in it,
And it advances to its hour,—its leaves
Begin to droop and wither in the sun;
But still the life-blood flows, and does not fail,
All into fruitfulness, all into form.

Then comes the vintage, for the days are ripe.
And surely now in its perfected bloom,
It may rejoice a little in its crown,
Though it bend low beneath the weight of it,
Wrought out of the long striving of its heart.
But ah! the hands are ready to tear down
The treasures of the grapes; the feet are there
To tread them in the winepress, gathered in;
Until the blood-red rivers of the wine
Run over, and the land is full of joy.
But the vine standeth stripped and desolate,
Having given all; and now its own dark time
Is come, and no man payeth back to it
The comfort and the glory of its gift;
But rather, now most merciless, all pain
And loss are piled together, as its days
Decline, and the spring sap has ceased to flow.

Now is it cut back to the very stem;
Despoiled, disfigured, left a leafless stock,
Alone through all the dark days that shall come.
And all the winter-time the wine gives joy
To those who else were dismal in the cold;
But the vine standeth out amid the frost;
And after all, hath only this grace left,
That it endures in long, lone steadfastness
The winter through:—and next year blooms again;
Not bitter for the torment undergone,
Not barren for the fulness yielded up;
As fair and fruitful towards the sacrifice,
As if no touch had ever come to it,
But the soft airs of heaven and dews of earth;—
And so fulfils itself in love once more.

And now, what more shall I say? Do I need here

To draw the lesson of this life; or say
More than these few words, following up the text:—
The Vine from every living limb bleeds wine;
Is it the poorer for that spirit shed?
The drunkard and the wanton drink thereof;
Are they the richer for that gift's excess?
Measure thy life by loss instead of gain;
Not by the wine drunk, but the wine poured forth;
For love's strength standeth in love's sacrifice;
And whoso suffers most hath most to give.

I speak to those who suffer:—they will know,
Better than I, the whole deep truth of it.
I who stand here complete in all my flesh,
Strong in the morning, sleeping fast at night,
Taking the winds of heaven as they blow,
Without a special sense, save joy in each,

Am not so much as worthy to stoop down
And kiss the sacred foot-prints of my Lord
Upon the feet of any such a one
As lieth patient here beneath His hand;
Whom Christ has bound on His own cross, to lie
Beside Him, till Himself shall give release;
And that shall not be, many a one knows well,
Until his place knows him no more on earth.

The Living Vine, Christ chose it for Himself:—
God gave to man for use and sustenance
Corn, wine, and oil, and each of these is good:
And Christ is Bread of Life, and Light of Life.
But yet He did not choose the summer corn,
That shoots up straight and free in one quick growth,
And has its day, and is done, and springs no more:
Nor yet the olive, all whose boughs are spread

In the soft air, and never lose a leaf.
Flowering and fruitful in perpetual peace:
But only this for Him and His in one,—
The everlasting, ever-quickening Vine,
That gives the heat and passion of the world,
Through its own life-blood, still renewed and shed.

God said to Man and Woman, "By thy sweat,
And by thy travail, thou shalt conquer earth:"
Not, by thy ease or pleasure:—and no good
Or glory of this life but comes by pain.
How poor were earth if all its martyrdoms,
If all its struggling sighs of sacrifice
Were swept away, and all were satiate-smooth;
If this were such a heaven of soul and sense
As some have dreamed of;—and we human still.
Nay, we were fashioned not for perfect peace

In this world, howsoever in the next:
And what we win and hold is through some strife.

Many are pains of life; I need not stay
To count them;—there is no one but hath felt
Some of them,—though unequally they fall.
But of all good gifts, ever hath been health
Counted the first, and loss of it to be
The hardest thing to bear: I do not speak
Of such imperfect passages of pain
As show us we are mortal, and should stir
Our hearts to greater diligence in life;—
But such long weakness, and such wearing pain
As has no end in view, that makes of life
One weary avenue of darkened days,
The bitter darkness growing darker still,
Which none can share or soothe, which sunders us

From all desire, or hope, or stir of change,
Or service of our Master in the world,
Or fellowship with all the faces round
Of passing pains and pleasures,—while our pain
Passeth not, nor will pass;—and only this
Remains for us to look for,—more of pain,
And doubt if we can bear it to the end.

And furthermore, from any other ill,
Except it be remorse, can men escape
By work, the healing of divinest balm
To whomso hath the courage to begin,
Not yielding to the bitterness of grief.
Or if that tyrannously be denied,
And the soul languishes in utter loss,
Still hope of an immortal, better life
Is left to every suffering innocence,

And love of every sweet and noble thing,
Though farther off than the far side of death,
And faith to feed upon, and keep the heart
Alive, through all the winter of this time.

But sickness holds the sick man in a chain
No will can break or bend to earthly use;
Not only holding him in bond of space,
Fixed in a rooted vegetable lot;—
But bond of time, so that the Present makes
All his possession, and he has no part
In any other being, all his nerves
Gathered and fixed in one intensest strain
Upon the Present; and no future bliss,
Nor harmony of past remembrances,
Can draw him from the anguish of the hour,
Or pay him back his loss, if loss it be.

Is it indeed a loss, or is it gain?
His Life is Pain, and he has naught besides:
Most miserable must he be indeed,
If this be wholly evil, as it seems.

But if this be the hardest ill of all
For mortal flesh and heart to bear in peace,
It is the one comes straightest from God's hand
And makes us feel Him nearest to ourselves.
God gives us light and love, and all good things
Richly for joy, and power, to use aright;
But then we may forget Him in His gifts:—
We cannot well forget the hand that holds,
And pierces us, and will not let us go,
However much we strive from under it.

If God speak to thee in the summer air,

The cool soft breath thou leanest forth to feel
Upon thy forehead;—dost thou feel it God?
Nay, but the wind: and when heart speaks to heart,
And face to face, when friends meet happily,
And all is merry, God is also there;—
But thou perceivest but thy fellow's part:
And when out of the dewy garden green
Some liquid syllables of music strike
A sudden, speechless rapture through thy frame,
Is it God's voice that moves thee?—Nay, the bird's,—
Who sings to God, and all the world and thee.
But when the sharp strokes flesh and heart run through,
For thee, and not another; only known,
In all the universe, through sense of thine;
Not caught by eye or ear, not felt by touch,
Nor apprehended by the spirit's sight,

But only by the hidden, tortured nerves,
In all their incommunicable pain,—
God speaks Himself to us, as mothers speak
To their own babes, upon the tender flesh
With fond familiar touches close and dear;—
Because He cannot choose a softer way
To make us feel that He Himself is near,
And each apart His own Beloved and known.

Sweet it is when a babe opens its eyes,
Blue, smiling, to its mother's morning kiss.
But thou, when waking to the morning light,
With unrefreshed and aching limbs, mayst feel
The heavy pressure of a constant pain
Upon thy forehead, and the weary brows
Throbbing beneath an unabated load.
Is it not God's own very finger-tips

Laid on thee in a tender steadfastness?
The light and careful touches which to thee
Seem heavy, because measured to thy strength,
With none to spare;—and yet He does not fail
For thy impatience, but stands by thee still,
Patient, unfaltering,—till thou too shalt grow
Patient, — and wouldst not miss the sharpness grown
To custom, which assures Him at thy side,
Hand to thy hand, and not far off in Heaven.
And when the night comes, and the weariness
Grows into fever, and thy anguish grows
Fiercer, and thou beseechest Him with tears,
"Depart from me, O Lord, and let me rest!"
He will not leave thee, He will not depart,
Nor loose thee, nor forget thee; but will clasp
Thee closer in the thrilling of His arms,

No prayer of ours shall ease before their time.
He gives His angels charge of those who sleep:
But He Himself watches with those who wake.

I know that some would here rebuke me, saying:
It is enough to live and move in God
With all Humanity, not seeking self
In any such exclusive special bond,
Which is not common to the whole of life.
And others would take from us even that:
Who deny God at all outside of us;
Saying, There is no evil and no good,
Nor anything at all, except ourselves,
And self-created modes of our own brain,
For all the living universe of God.
The old false teachers, who at first seemed hard
To nature,—bidding, Crucify the flesh

To save the soul,—were merciful to these;
For these would crucify the soul itself,
And stifle back upon itself the cry,
And deepest craving of the human heart,—
That which drew Moses to the Mount of Fire,
That which shook David on his couch of tears,
That which upheld Dante to Paradise,
That which saved Byron through the depths of sin,—
The unutterable thirst of man for God,
The immortal part of us, if such there be.
For me, I do not hold so hard a creed;
Nor would refuse the comfort Christ implored.

I, in the midst of those who suffer so,—
Who needs must somewhat share the daily pain
Which each of ye, Beloved, must endure,
Must also seek some comfort, and some strength

Of hope to live and suffer by;—and this
Hath God given me, Beloved, for your sakes,
To whom I fain would pass it. Bear with me,
While unto each I seem to speak,—all ye
Who suffer;—and I see around me none
But suffers, but to whom, with reverence,
These words of mine, these hopes of mine, are due.

If suffering be indeed our Law of Life,
If this world, through our fathers' sin and ours,
May not be perfect any more until
The slow development of centuries
Do bring to birth a higher race than we,
It is so much the more a fitting school
Of patience, for the time we must remain,—
Of charity towards fellow-wayfarers
Beside us bearing each his human cross,

In secret or in sight, but each his own ;
And furthermore of hope, the unblamed hope
Of the new world wherein all things are new,
Where only their own works do follow them
Who rest from pain and labour, and by faith
And love have won a nearer step towards God.
Hope thitherward for this life's recompense ;
For here what one sows must another reap,
And children suffer for their fathers' sins
While they live here ; but in that other world
Shall each man reap his own inheritance :
Such heritage as he has left behind
For those who follow here, who are the worse
Or better for his sojourning with them.

But if it be the worse, if the foregone
Sin of thy parents or some other one's,

(For our lives here are mostly in the power
Of other lives, and each of us is bound
To be his brother's keeper), have made earth
Alien to thee, and poisoned at the fount
The natural springs of joy, and set within
The wheels of life a crook, that never more
Swiftly and smoothly they may turn, and bound
Weights on thy ankles,—what is that to thee,
Who livest not for one time, but for all?
God keeps account of that; only take care
Those same pathetic haunting eyes of thine,
For which some soul doth suffer punishment,
Do meet thee not again in wife or child,
Or sick man at thy gates, or starving man
That wrought thy goodly raiment, or the brute
And ignorant fury of the brotherless,
Whose firebrand lights the roofs of palaces.

Look not on thine own loss, but look beyond,
And take the Cross for glory and for guide.

For one star differeth from another star
In glory and in use; and all are stairs
Of the illimitable House of God;
And every one has its own name and place
Distinguished, and some special word is given
For each to utter in the mystic song
Which is not found in speech of humankind,
Which is not understood by human heart,
Even though heard by those caught up to Heaven,
Who heard and saw, but could not tell the things
Which they had heard and seen,—which neither men
Nor angels, nor the conscious suns of space,
Nor anything created, hears in whole;
But that grows fuller, clearer, as we grow

Nearer to God, with Whom is neither part
Nor pause, Who gathers in one Infinite
All number, sound, and space, and light, and law,
Rejoicing utterly, eternally.

And when God formed in the hollow of His hand
This ball of Earth among His other balls,
And set it in His shining firmament,
Between the greater and the lesser lights,
He chose it for the Star of Suffering.

I think, when God looks down the ranks of Heaven,
And sees them, not as we see, points of fire,
But as the animate spirits of the spheres,
He doth behold the Angel of the Earth,
Stretched like Prometheus on the promontory,
(Upon the outermost verge of rocky seas

That sweep to shadow as they turn in Heaven,
Swept with the earth, but trembling towards the moon,
Bound to a perpetuity of pain,
Willing and strong, and finding in his pain
God, and his one unbroken note of praise
In the full rush of cosmic harmony.

But we are men, not angels. We abide
Not on this earth; but for a little space
We pass upon it; and while so we pass,
God through the dark hath set the Light of Life,
With witness for Himself, the Word of God,
To be among us Man, with human heart,
And human language, thus interpreting
The One great Will incomprehensible,
Only so far as we in human life
Are able to receive it; men as men,

Can reach no higher than the Son of God,
The perfect Head and Pattern of mankind.
The time is short, and this sufficeth us
To live and die by; and in Him again
We see the same first, starry attribute,
"Perfect through suffering," our salvation's seal
Set in the front of His Humanity.
For God has other Words for other worlds,
But for this world the Word of God is Christ.
And when we come to die we shall not find
The day has been too long for any of us
To have fulfilled the perfect law of Christ.
Who is there that can say, "My part is done
In this: now I am ready for a law
More wide, more perfect for the rest of life"?
Is any living that has not come short?
Has any died that was not short at last?

The ultimate symbol of Divinity
How can we dream of? we have got no sense
Whereby to seize it: but in Him we touch
The ultimate symbol of Humanity,
Humanity that touches the Divine
By some fine link, intangible to us,
Upon that side of mortal consciousness
That looks towards Death; and we must pass the gates
Of Death, linked with Him, holding by the hand
Our Brother gone before, before we come
To the perception how our life is joined
To God's; for we are now the Sons of God,
And know we shall be like Him there, but what
We shall be doth not yet appear; but when
We see Him we shall know Him as He is.
And who shall be our Angels in the worlds
That lie before us, or what Words of God,

Unknown, unuttered, and undreamt of yet,
May meet us there, how should we know or guess?

And shall we then be restless in the search
For other proofs and witnesses of God,
Before our hearts have rested on the One
He gave us in our very flesh to know?
Impatient for the noonday, shall we miss
The sunrise we shall never see again?
And all the tender colours of the dawn,—
The vision of the crimson clouds that hang
Above us, and the lovely Morning-Star
That will be vanished when the sun is high?

—As children might, impatient of the school,
Despise the letters, longing for the songs
And stories that they catch the echoes of.

The songs are written, but first, learn to spell!
The books will keep,—but if we will not learn,
We shall not read them when the right time comes,
Or read them wrongly and confusedly.
And each hour has its lesson, and each life;
And if we miss one life, we shall not find
Its lesson in another; rather, go
So much the less complete for evermore,
Still missing something that we cannot name,
Still with our senses so far unattuned
To what the Present brings to harmonise
With our soul's Past. For must we not believe
A soul, bred up in perfect rule of growth,
And of obedience to the Will Divine
Through all its stages, would be born in each
In physical and spiritual harmony
With that world's order as conceived by God;

(However marred by time, and falling off,
By disobedience, into pain and sin,
Down to the actual order of the day)?
And therefore Christ, conceived and born on earth
So perfect, through foregone obedience,
Came, and abode, and lived harmoniously
With all the occult powers, the holy springs
Unfallen of the waters and the winds,
And the miracles of life within the blood,
That at His voice or touch, still easily
Obeyed, through laws of sense and soul at one;
And lived with God in such untroubled love
And clear confiding, as a child on whom
The Father's face has never yet but smiled;
And with men even, in such harmony
Of brotherhood, that whatsoever spark
Of pure and true in any human heart

Flickered and lived, it burned itself towards Him
In an electric current, through all bonds
Of intervening race and creed and time,
And flamed up to a heat of living faith,
And love, and love's communion, and the joy
And inspiration of self-sacrifice;
And drew together in a central coil,
Magnetic, all the noblest of all hearts,
And made them one with Him, in a live flame
That is the purifying and the warmth
Of all the earth even to these latter days.

But found one kingdom not in harmony;
The sin and sorrow in the world, the stream
Of evil, gathering on from age to age,
With all its rocks and all its wrecks of life;
And men's hearts hardened, and the tender lips

Of women loud in laughter, and the sobs
Of children helpless, and the sighs of slaves,
And priests with dead lies for the living truth,
And kings whose rights were in their people's wrong.
And looking, the miraculous tender eyes,
Upon these perishing and gone astray,
Lifted the hands of help, alone, unarmed,
Struck singly out, and dashed upon the rocks.
And in that shock did meet His human doom
Of suffering, and took it for a crown;
The loneliness, the weariness, the strife,
The base return, the Passion and the Cross,
And the withdrawal of His Father's face.
—So that for ever since, in minds of men,
By some true instinct this life has survived
In a religious immemorial light,
Pre-eminent in one thing most of all;

The Man of Sorrows;—and the Cross of Christ
Is more to us than all His miracles.

And that most closely we may follow Him
By suffering, have all hearts of men allowed.
Is suffering then more near and dear to God
For its own sake than joy is? God forbid!
We know not its beginning nor its end;
Is it a sacrifice? a test? a school?
The fruit of Evil;—yet what Evil means
None knoweth, though he spent his life to know.
We suffer. Why we suffer,—that is hid
With God's foreknowledge in the clouds of Heaven.
The first book written sends that human cry
Out of the clear Chaldean pasture-lands
Down forty centuries; and no answer yet
Is found, nor will be found, while yet we live

In limitations of Humanity.
But yet one thought has often stayed by me
In the night-watches, which has brought at least
The patience for the hour, and made the pain
No more a burden which I groaned to leave,
But something precious which I feared to lose.
—How shall I show it, but by parables?

The sculptor, with his Psyche's wings half-hewn,
May close his eyes in weariness, and wake
To meet the white cold clay of his ideal
Flushed into beating life, and singing down
The ways of Paradise. The husbandman
May leave the golden fruitage of his groves
Ungarnered, and upon the Tree of Life
Will find a richer harvest waiting him.
The soldier dying thinks upon his bride,

And knows his arms shall never clasp her more,
Until he first the face of his unborn child
Behold in heaven: for each and all of life,
In every phase of action, love, and joy,
There is fulfilment only otherwhere.—

But if, impatient, thou let slip thy cross,
Thou wilt not find it in this world again,
Nor in another; here, and here alone,
Is given thee to *suffer* for God's sake.
In other worlds we shall more perfectly
Serve Him and love Him, praise Him, work for Him,
Grow near and nearer Him with all delight;
But then we shall not any more be called
To suffer, which is our appointment here.
Canst thou not suffer then one hour,—or two?

If He should call thee from thy cross to-day,
Saying, It is finished!—that hard cross of thine
From which thou prayest for deliverance,
Thinkest thou not some passion of regret
Would overcome thee? Thou wouldst say, "So soon?
Let me go back, and suffer yet awhile
More patiently;—I have not yet praised God."
And He might answer to thee,—"Never more.
All pain is done with." Whensoe'er it comes,
That summons that we look for, it will seem
Soon, yea too soon. Let us take heed in time
That God may now be glorified in us;
And while we suffer, let us set our souls
To suffer perfectly: since this alone,
The suffering, which is this world's special grace,
May here be perfected and left behind.

—But in obedience and humility;—
Waiting on God's hand, not forestalling it.
Seek not to snatch presumptuously the palm
By self-election; poison not thy wine
With bitter herbs if He has made it sweet;
Nor rob God's treasuries because the key
Is easy to be turned by mortal hands.
The gifts of birth, death, genius, suffering,
Are all for His hand only to bestow.
Receive thy portion, and be satisfied.
Who crowns himself a king is not the more
Royal; nor he who mars himself with stripes
The more partaker of the Cross of Christ.

But if Himself He come to thee, and stand
Beside thee, gazing down on thee with eyes
That smile, and suffer; that will smite thy heart,

With their own pity, to a passionate peace;
And reach to thee Himself the Holy Cup,
(With all its wreathen stems of passion-flowers
And quivering sparkles of the ruby stars),
Pallid and royal, saying, "Drink with Me;"
Wilt thou refuse? Nay, not for Paradise!
The pale brow will compel thee, the pure hands
Will minister unto thee; thou shalt take
Of that communion through the solemn depths
Of the dark waters of thine agony,
With heart that praises Him, that yearns to Him
The closer through that hour. Hold fast His hand,
Though the nails pierce thine too! take only care
Lest one drop of the sacramental wine
Be spilled, of that which ever shall unite
Thee, soul and body, to thy living Lord!

Therefore gird up thyself, and come, to stand
Unflinching under the unfaltering hand,
That waits to prove thee to the uttermost.
It were not hard to suffer by His hand,
If thou couldst see His face;—but in the dark!
That is the one last trial:—be it so.
Christ was forsaken, so must thou be too:
How couldst thou suffer but in seeming, else?
Thou wilt not see the face nor feel the hand,
Only the cruel crushing of the feet,
When through the bitter night the Lord comes down
To tread the winepress.—Not by sight, but faith,
Endure, endure,—be faithful to the end!'

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